



Memories of RNAS Hal Far

(January-March, 1956)

By John Quin
(No. 208 Squadron, 1955-1957)

In August 1955 upon completion of my National Service training at RAF Yatesbury as an Air Wireless Mechanic, I was posted to 208 FR Squadron then based at RAF Abu Sueir in the Canal Zone. Just before Christmas the CO, Squadron Leader Tom F. Neil DFC, announced 208 would be leaving in January, under the British military withdrawal plan from the Zone. However, because the new base for the squadron in Cyprus at RAF Akrotiri was not yet completed, we would be detached to the Royal Navy in Malta, at RNAS Hal Far for approximately two months.

Jubilation all round! No more sand storms; no more pungent airs from the nearby 'sweet water' canal; no more hostility from the locals; no more guard duty; decent grub and recognisable beer brands! Freedom — at least for two months! The feeling was definitely akin to being let out of jail, or escaping from enemy territory. What a Christmas present!

In some ways 208 Squadron was 'coming home' in transferring to RNAS Hal Far. Just a few weeks before the move was announced, the squadron had been presented with its colours, representing forty years of service, which started in WW1 as No. 8

Squadron RNAS. For some of us however, the Hal Far 'return' to the RNAS was initially more than a trifle dodgy. We were trucked to RAF Fayed to board a Hastings. Upon reaching Malta, we circled for a considerable period awaiting some lessening of the heavy, dark grey cloud that blanketed the whole island. There was absolutely no sign of land, let alone the Hal Far airfield. With no alleviation in the weather conditions, finally we were briefed for a rough landing and the aircraft commenced a blind let-down. Rain lashed the windows and dense cloud enveloped the whole aircraft on the approach. We never saw the runway. Suddenly the engines surged, flaps and undercarriage were raised as we went round again. I think there were two more abortive attempts. On the fourth try, the runway suddenly appeared beneath us just as the wheels hit the tarmac. Some kind of an alarm was sounded — a shout, a warning from the flight deck — and the brakes came on heavily thrusting everyone back into their standard RAF Transport Command rearward-facing seats. In drenching rain and cloud near to the ground we came to rest well into the overshoot at the western end of the main north-west/south-east runway, not far short of a rock wall and what seemed, in the

poor visibility, an embankment. In clear daylight, this turned out to be just an incline of a low hill, but criss-crossed by the typical Malta stone walls of the fields, that would have greatly hindered any rescue, as they did during WW2 operations, and made a nasty mess of the 'plane, not to speak of us! Touchdown had been about half-way down the runway we discovered. There was a delay until "special dis-embarkation arrangements" were made, which turned out to be some jury-rigged stairs and duckboards. As we emerged into the rain and gloom the Hastings wheels could be seen or not seen, depending on one's perspective! - sunk well into the mud, over which we trudged en route to transportation waiting at a nearby hangar. Welcome to Malta!

I think that must have been part of the most awful spell of weather that marked our first weeks of operations at Hal Far. Our billets were at the old seaplane base at Kalafrana and, since abandonment of regular operations there, the Nissen huts had not seen much maintenance. They were damp and poorly equipped with minimal furniture of questionable antiquity. Heating was totally inadequate in those initial weather conditions. In the evening we sat about listening to the radio huddled

Facing Page: Line up of No. 208 Squadron Meteors in Suez markings
Right: HMS Centaur and HMS Albion at Kalafrana bay

(All photos by the author)

in our greatcoats, which we then spread over our beds to maintain as much warmth as possible during the night. The radio was a great boon - our only diversion - at this early stage of the detachment. A British Armed Forces service relayed BBC programmes and played popular music from a local transmitting station. The evening programme was always introduced with the music of "I don't know why I love you like I do. I don't know why. I just do" played without vocals at a jaunty gait on a theatre organ. Even now, fifty years later, I can never hear that refrain without visualising Kalafrana billet 57 bedecked with wet clothing.

All our Meteor aircraft, FR9's, F8's and T7's, were parked on the hard-standing outside the hangars at the western end of the airfield, on the south side of the main runway. Hangar accommodation was scarce due to so many RNAS aircraft on shore from the carriers in port. So, although our maintenance sections were able to find some hangar space for spares and equipment, that for our aircraft was only available when major maintenance was required. All regular maintenance, therefore, had to be carried out on the dispersal, which in those conditions immediately after our arrival was both unpleasant and difficult. The only wet weather gear I had was the standard issue military cape a sort of poncho - long at the sides, short in the



front and back; totally unsuitable for aircraft working situations. In driving rain and the swirling blustery wind that seemed to plague that corner of the airfield, what was at most a normal ten minute single pre-flight check took nearly twenty minutes, at the end of which I was thoroughly soaked - with perhaps another six aircraft yet to be checked. With at least six different trades having to access the controls there must have been some provision or mechanism to keep the cockpit dry - other than jump in quick and re-close the canopy - but I cannot recall what that may have been. What is clearly etched in my mind is stripping off in the Radio Section, towelling down and after an earlier change, having to stand around in my underwear, tussling with the other Section members for space to dry my overalls and winter trousers with a small electric two bar fire. I also remember having to go to lunch in very damp clothes. By the end of the afternoon, two changes of clothes would be un-wearable.

The trucks returning the line maintenance personnel to Kalafrana would be

full of fitters and mechanics clothed in not much more than damp overalls, clutching a bundle of trousers, shirts and sweaters wringing wet. The immediate rush upon arrival was either for a prime place at the yet to be lit billet stove or for a personal dunking in-at that hour - the limited hot water at the showers. depending on one's personal priorities ie. dry clothes or a warm body - one could not have both! A quick change into civvies for the journey back in the waiting truck for tea, then either back in the truck to the billet or to the splendid NAAFI, which was superbly equipped and furnished but which entailed a walk in the rain back to Kalafrana. The public bus service was limited.

Overnight the billets became enormous drying sheds of usually frustrated hope that one would have warm dry clothes for the morning. My choice was always to go for a prime position around the billet stove when we came back from the line, then get up half an hour earlier than most of my companions in the morning, when the billet was dreadfully cold and the majority preferred to stay in

A pair of Meteor FR9s taxiing out at Hal Far



Royal Navy Sea Vampire T22



their 'pits', to take advantage of the enormous quantities of scalding hot shower water; a sort of Japanese ofuru but standing up. During this period of punishing weather — which lasted a fortnight — there was considerable sickness; lots of heavy colds and coughs, bronchitis and the like. The weather did seriously limit flying, which in the circumstances, with of so many ground crew being far from fit, and off duty, was perhaps just as well.

The expectations and promises generated by the announcement of the detachment to Hal Far therefore, were not being fulfilled. Some even yearned for the warmer comforts of the Canal Zone. The arrival landing had been decidedly un-nerving and some individuals had been in some degree of shock for a while. The weather was abysmal and the accommodation far below par. But the grub was just fantastic - compared to RAF standards. There was a wonderful variety, excellent quality of food and no stinting on helpings. I particularly remember a breakfast main

course of grilled kidneys on toast, in a thick, rich gravy. I don't like kidneys, so I always swapped mine for another's toast and gravy; a great start to the day. And there was mid-day grog!

On our first arrival for lunch at the mess-hall - sorry: 'galley' - we were confronted by an enormous line of RN personnel outside, who made it very clear that we had to "join the queue". After a few minutes an RN officer and Petty Officer and two ratings appeared with a huge cauldron ofRUM, which they proceeded to ladle out into each individual's mug. The rum was diluted but did wonders for easing the cold of the wet working conditions but little for operational efficiency after lunch and return to the line! Within a few days of less than sterling afternoon performances, grog for RAF personnel was restricted to those of twenty-one years and over. This quickly generated a practice among the more enterprising +21 year olds of donating their tot to others or swapping the grog for an additional dessert or even a main course!! After a couple of

weeks, even this entrepreneurship was stifled with only senior NCO's and officers becoming entitled to mid-day rum, which was also withheld from those officers scheduled to fly in the afternoon.

And then finally the sun came out and we began to enjoy Hal Far and our surroundings. In the early Spring weather, many of us elected to miss the transportation and walk to and from Kalafrana, which was delightful, the sea air fresh and invigorating. We explored the old seaplane base - still then largely intact. There may even have been one or two movements at that time. We strolled into Birzebbugia, where Ronnie's bar quickly became an outpost of 208 ground crew and we occasionally walked on to Marsaxlokk, mainly, I suspect, when cash was too low to permit a long stay at Ronnie's.

The carriers *Ark Royal*, *Centaur* and *Albion* were variously in the Birzebbugia/Marsaxlokk harbour at this time, attracting a lot of attention - again, mostly perhaps when funds were too low to allow much time at Ronnie's. There was a bus service that came to RNAS Hal Far but this was somewhat irregular and limited in operating hours, and my more usual method of going into Valletta was to walk into Birzebbugia to catch a bus from there. I rather think there was also a late night return service on that route. I was intrigued that all the Maltese passengers made the sign of the cross immediately the engine was

United States Navy P-2V Neptunes of VP-24 'Batman' at Hal Far



Hawker Hunters F4s of No. 3 Squadron. Serial of 'P' is not visible but 'C' in the background is recorded as being XF949



started at the Valletta terminus; not exactly a sign of faith in the safety of the bus and/or the competence of the driver to reach our destination!

Other diversions began to appear. Fig Off Doug Johns raised a basketball team to play the various Hal Far naval units. There was a 'wrennery' at Kalafrana. Flg Offs Denis Briggs and Pete Anstee - with very personal aims in mind I hazard — coerced several of us to play hockey so that they could issue a challenge to the WRNS unit. Towards the end of the match there was a sharp shower which immediately turned the game into a wet blouse contest. The Wrens won, of course, the hockey match - that is! What other victories may have been scored is not recorded.

At the dispersal the RNAS groundcrews were very sociable and cooperative, showing us over the Gannets, Sea Venoms and the sleek Sea Hawks with their particularly fine lines. Something of an undeclared aerobatic competition developed between the Sea Hawk pilots — there was more than one squadron - and their 208 counterparts. One of 208's favourite manoeuvres was a very fast, 4 aircraft formation, low level *Prince of Wales* over the line, the shock wave of which gave one a surprisingly hard smack on the head. None of the RNAS pilots attempted to emulate this. RNAS ground crew maintained that their pilots were not allowed this move at Hal Far, after a few Sea Hawks had been lost to downdraught at the cliff edge when making a low level approach to the main

runway over the sea from the east. Whether this was a sailor's tale or fact was never determined but based on our hairy arrival experience, accidents in adverse weather in such an approach were highly credible.

What was in no doubt was the ban on joy rides to the UK on the US Navy Neptunes. Every Friday one went to Britain 'for supplies'. This flight was known as the 'ice cream' or 'candy floss' run. Armed with a 48 hour pass when one's name came to the top of the list, one could hitch a ride home on this weekly flight which returned on Sunday evening, that is until a Neptune went down with the loss of everyone on board. The hitch-hiker that weekend was not from 208. The occasional US Navy Mercator visited Hal Far, from somewhere in Italy I believe. There was very little interaction between the Americans and ourselves, especially after the cancellation of the joy rides to the UK. So I never found out why one of the Mercator crew would sit amidships outside the aircraft during taxiing. The individual wore headphones and to all appearances was guiding the pilot, but there was no visibility problem at Hal Far in seeing the taxi-ways and airfield lay-out. Maybe it was just an American 'thing'.

The 208 Radio Section was in one of the offices that ran along the side of a hangar in the south-west corner of the airfield and comprised a Sergeant, two Corporals, a Junior Technician, an SAC and me, by that time an LAC. The SAC and I were generally responsible for all

the day to day aircraft checks. If there was a major snag on an aircraft that was beyond us two 'erks' — which was usually the case — the JT or one of the corporals would sort out the problem. Although not all our equipment had been transferred from RAF Abu Sueir, the Section was fairly self-sufficient. For any special items we did not hold, either myself or the SAC rode over to the stores at RAF Luqa.

The journey to that facility was always through RAF Safi, where a 208 Squadron Meteor FR 9, which had gone seriously unserviceable either en route to or from the Canal Zone, had made an emergency landing and now stood forlorn and abandoned. I believe it was eventually cannibalised. The Sergeant and the two Corporals took responsibility for aircraft major overhauls. The JT was mainly tied to the workbench overhauling or repairing units, assisted by the NCO's with difficulties or any work build-up or back-log. From this overview of the Radio Section the reader will have deduced who were the main users of the two bar electric fire during the initial poor weather after arrival!

During this period of detachment to RNAS Hal Far, the call signs that are used today were introduced in replacement of those that had been in use during WW2. So 'Baker' became 'Bravo', 'Dog' became 'Delta', 'Easy' became 'Echo', 'George' became 'Golf', etc, all in the name of internationalism. We all had problems in both remembering and using these, receiving frequent reprimands.

mands from both aircrew and the control tower when making transmission/receiving tests using the old call signs. Airframe riggers, engine fitters and armourers and other ground crew, however, continued to use the old nomenclatures for identifying individual aircraft with impunity, which perhaps highlighted the then importance attached to our communications which were 'live'. This did not occur to me at that time. All I could see was that I was getting a rollicking and others were not!

The weather improved and the opportunity for gunnery practice was taken. For this a temporary dispersal was constructed at the extreme eastern end of the airfield just to the south of the taxiway, arranged in such a way that parked aircraft were pointing out to sea. All ground crew were required to spot the shells falling into the water during the test firing prior to a 'live' sortie — and not to wander in front of the aircraft!! One of the Meteor T7s towed the target over a range off Dingli. Aircraft guns were loaded with cannon shells of which a major part had been painted with a special dye; red, blue, green and purple/mauve are colours I recall. There may have been yellow and/or orange as well. A hit on the target left a distinct colour. The armourers set up a score board for each sortie cum pilot but there were a lot of questions about the results.

For example a pilot flying 'Nan' in the morning might make an impressive score but then flying 'Fox' in the afternoon would fail to make any hit at all.

This invariably brought firstly into dispute the harmonisation of the guns, especially if that had been handled by different armourer crews. Often there were issues of the stability of a given aircraft. Clearly the pilots knew the individual characteristics of each Meteor and had their 'favourite' aircraft. Sometimes the calibration of the gun-sight was queried.

But there must have been a private 'book' being run amongst the aircrew in the ops tent because it was not unusual for the target to be 'lost', ie. after one or two passes, a pilot would fly alongside the target to see his success rate. If this was low, then the final shells would be used to sever the tow. There was something of a carnival atmosphere during this exercise, Ground crew would take a snooze in the sun between sorties and frequent visits by the NAAF1 wagon. And being just off the taxiway, and not far from the main runway, many took the opportunity to put their limited camera capability to use. The area was on an elevated ground and was certainly an excellent location for take-off photography. I think it may have been from this vantage point that I saw the final moments of a troop-carrying York soon after take-off from RAF Luqa. Someone amongst our ground crew noticed the plane streaming heavy black smoke shortly after leaving the ground. In what seemed exasperating slow motion, we all watched in dread as the aircraft failed to climb and slowly disappeared behind the low hill to the west of the airfield,

from where a huge pall of smoke arose. Those picturesque low stone walls that typify the Malta scene and into which we had nearly overshot on arrival, made rescue attempts virtually impossible. The carnival tone vanished and operations were very subdued for several days.

And then suddenly in March the detachment was over. My two months at Hal Far were at an end. "RAF Akrotiri is ready for you" was the message, though 'after a fashion' was the reality we discovered upon arrival. A very depleted Radio Section started the work of packing up; the Sergeant, a Corporal, and the Junior Technician had completed their tours and returned to the UK with no replacements. The SAC was posted elsewhere. The remaining corporal and I were left to fill the boxes and complete the final aircraft checks for the flights to Cyprus. Then before embarkation on the vessel 'Cheshire', the Corporal's 'time was up', to leave just LAC me i/c Radio Section 208 Squadron; but that is another story. After about six months at RAF Akrotiri, 208 Squadron returned to Malta, but this time to RAF Takali. During the remainder of 1956, I never had a chance to return to Hal Far which I would have gladly taken, if only for a breakfast of kidneys on toast - providing I could swap the kidneys, of course, for someone else's toast and gravy.



Meteor F.8 with U.S. Navy Neptune in the background